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SUBJECT: RUSSIA CRIES FOUL OVER 2007 HUMAN RIGHTS REPORT

¶1. (SBU) Summary: Although press coverage of the 2007 Human Rights Report has been largely straightforward, the Russian MFA and several members of the State Duma have accused the U.S. of having double standards and a "Cold War" mentality. The head of the Helsinki Moscow Group defended the report and called upon the Russian government to correct the shortcomings mentioned, rather than simply condemn it out of hand. End Summary.

¶2. (SBU) Russian print and internet press have for the most part reported factually on the contents of the 2007 Human Rights Report with little editorial comment. Their reports focused mainly on U.S. criticism of Russia's centralization of power in the executive branch, restrictions on freedom of expression, media independence, unsolved murders of journalists, abuse by members of law enforcement (particularly in Chechnya and elsewhere in the North Caucasus), hazing in the military and government pressure on NGOs. Several newspapers picked up on the absence of China on this year's list of the worst offenders, and theorized that it was because of sensitivities over the Olympics. According to the independent daily Nezavisimaya Gazeta (NG), as in previous years, the report "abounds in criticism of Moscow called fair by Russian human rights activists and rejected as unjustified by officials." Vremya Novostey observed that the report "repeats its cliché accusations year after year," and further chided that "still China, listed among the worst violators in the two previous years, was spared this time. However, the power of the Communist Party of China has not weakened during the past year."

MFA Pulls Few Punches in its Criticism

¶3. (SBU) In a statement posted March 12 on its official website, the MFA accused the U.S. of double standards and called the report "not objective." It also claimed that many paragraphs do not change from year-to-year, giving the impression that the report is written to fit pre-determined conclusions about the human rights situation here. The MFA contested the criticism in the report of the decision by the OSCE's Office of Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) not to send an observation mission for the December Duma elections, stating that "the politicized approach of ODIHR" never received the backing of the OSCE member states. The MFA went on to call the report yet another demonstration of the "double standards" in U.S. human rights policy -- one for external use and another for domestic consumption. It chastised the U.S. for distorted criticism of the human rights situation in other countries while it has "legalized torture, applied capital punishment to minors, denied responsibility for war crimes and massive human rights abuses in Iraq and Afghanistan, and refused to join a series of human rights treaties." The statement closed with the hope that in its periodic review of the human rights performance of all countries, the UN Human Rights Council will enable an

unprejudiced discussion of existing human rights problems, including a report on the United States.

Duma Members Also React Defensively

14. (SBU) Vasiliy Likhachev, Deputy Chairman of the Federation Council Committee for International Affairs, told reporters that the report could not "free itself from Russophobic trends." He added that the report bodes poorly for relations between the U.S. and Russia, as it came during the transfer of power from Putin to Medvedev, and therefore signals how the U.S. will "assess future political, economic and humanitarian processes in Russia." Likhachev also noted that the U.S. had problems of its own, such as crime, the penal system and camps at which suspected terrorists are being held. Andrey Klimov, Deputy Chairman of the Duma Committee on International Affairs, thought that U.S. officials were comfortable giving such assessments since they have "grown up during the Cold War and know nothing else."

Local Human Rights Leader Defended the Report

15. (SBU) In an interview with Nezavisimaya Gazeta, Lyudmila Alekseyeva, head of the Moscow Helsinki Group, called the report "professional" and asserted that its author knows the human rights situation in Russia. She called upon the GOR to react to such reports by paying attention to the shortcomings noted in it and improving the situation. According to Alekseyeva, Russia's misplaced vision of its glory keep it from being able to do this. She added, "honor is not lashing out when shortcomings are noted, but rather correcting the problem."

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Comment:

16. (SBU) The largely factual discussion in the print media of this year's report and measured response by Alekseyeva are in sharp contrast to the (traditional) chest-thumping by the MFA and those Duma members who have ventured to make statements about it. There is much in the report that will have resonance with ordinary Russians -- mothers whose sons have been hazed in the military and families in the North Caucasus whose members have suffered mistreatment by law enforcement.

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